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J. ALDEN WEIR

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JULIAN ALDEN WEIR

AN ESSAY BY DUNCAN PHILLIPS



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# JULIAN ALDEN WEIR

BY DUNCAN PHILLIPS



INCE the passing so recently from our midst of J. Alden Weir, the best critical opinion, in his own country at least, has crystalized rapidly and acclaimed him with a remarkable degree of confidence as a man for the ages, as one who now enters upon a splendid destiny of imperishable and ever increasing fame. I do not feel certain that Weir will ever be one of the popular painters who are appraised at or above their real value by the general public. He never carried his heart on his sleeve, never painted pictures which correspond to "household words," never tried to entertain nor to educate the crowd, nor to organize a following and start a "movement." He was contemptuous not only of sentimentality, but of sensationalism and of the notoriety which so often passes for fame, and in his own manner of painting, so marked was his restraint that he tended to an expression of unconscious austerity. Yet he was the most approachable and genial of men. And the very essence of his art—what makes it great—what will make it immortal—is the warm and glowing loveliness which underlies the reserve. Weir believed that art is not worth all the time and talk men spend upon it if it does not stimulate to finer issues our dormant faculties for living. If the value of art is measured according to its expressional power, then the art of Weir is a very great art even if it is not entirely easy of access. It is the pure gold deep in the earth which we must dig to find, not the cheap gilding on the gaudy surface of commercial ornaments.

We have lost in Weir a painter of a great tradition—an artist absolutely individual and independent of any School, yet one who belongs in the company of all those masters of truthful observation and personal expression in painting who have cared more for true and fine relations of color and tone and of light and shade, and for true and fine interpretations of beauty and character in the visible world, than for the formal analysis of abstract esthetic principles and the repetition of formulas for classical design. Weir was beloved by all factions in the rather overheated air of disputation in which, strange to say, art seems to flourish. There never was any doubt where he stood. Although a member of the National Academy since 1895, and President of that body from 1915 to 1917, he was nevertheless an adventurous spirit himself, open minded and sympathetic in regard to the adventures of the younger men and opposed to the tyranny of tradition and to all dogmatic intolerance. His reasonableness was so sweet that “poseurs” were shamed to sincerity and extremists sobered to moderation by his influence, recognizing in him a spirit no less young than theirs, but mellowed by a big sincerity and a temperate and judicious poise and a loyalty to high ideals. In his own work there is a selection and a fusion of what was best in the truly great artists of many centuries. However, so fresh was his point of view, so spontaneous and ardent his response to the stimulations of life, so selfreliant his character and so fond of experiment his boyish nature, that slowly, even laboriously, yet surely, he evolved and created for himself a technique which is his alone in the history of art, and the perfect medium for the expression of what he had to say. Old Masters as different as Velasquez and Rembrandt, Chardin and Gainsborough, Constable and Corot, would have recognized in Weir an artist of their unmistakable kind. Jean François Millet stood before the prize-winning picture which Weir, a Beaux Arts student at the time, had painted for his landlady of the Inn at Barbizon, and exclaimed, “Tout a fait distingué.” Where Corot, Monet, Manet left off, Weir carried on.



I realize that I should not be hazarding an opinion nor daring to estimate the ultimate place in history of one so near to me in time and so dear to me in memory. I loved Alden Weir, and now that he is gone it is more difficult than ever for me to write of him as an artist in a manner altogether free from the bias of my affection for him as a man. Fortunately in this case the man and his work were one. It would be difficult to estimate the man and his own special and indispensable quality without reference to his work which perfectly expressed him. On the other hand, it would be a most unprofitable business to study his paintings from the merely technical standpoint, since there is no technical merit in his work, however great, which explains the enchantment of his art, which is absolutely a matter of personal charm; charm plus nobility breathed into his best drawing and pervading that unerring instinct of his for fine choices which we may call his taste, so that his art and his personality seem to be somehow compounded and inseparable, and his paintings the radiations of the man's own spirit, sincere, sensitive, almost shy, yet virile and joyous.

It seems to me that the two outstanding points which I wish to emphasize are, first, Weir's special capacity to make us see and feel that ordinary human experiences are desirable and delightful, and the world, (to each of us his own world), full of places and people inexplicably attractive and worth knowing. Second, the personal independence which pervaded everything he did and found for itself a well pondered and ultimately perfected medium of expression, so well adapted to it that it seems part of it, the spirit of the artist animating and refining the rather rebellious substance of the copious pigment which he loaded and manipulated mysteriously. There is a third point which I wish now to stress—his Americanism, his combination of certain traits which we like to think of as characteristic, not of what is common but what is best in the American. And in this third aspect of his art we shall only be considering again the first and second, for they complete

my very simple conception and interpretation of Weir the artist and the man. Weir's Americanism was, let me admit at once, of a special rather than a complete or composite character. As has been said of him, "From the America of immigration and quantity production he stood apart. His task was to fix the survival of the older America, the Anglo-Saxon America of the founders of our old families, more particularly yet, the America developed in New England and New York." "Weir carried into American painting," writes Frank Jewett Mather in *The Review*, "a quality of esthetic conscience akin to that of William Dean Howells and Henry James in his earlier phase. Whether his theme was a New England village or farm or a finely bred American girl, earnest, trained in scruple and nicety of thought and conduct, always he thought to tell the truth of the matter, neglecting none of the finer shades and overtones."

Now this subtlety of observation and this delicacy of feeling are not generally considered qualities either of American art or of American character, at least not by those who usually talk loudest and longest about what they call "the American note" or "the American flavor" in books and plays and paintings. There is a cult nowadays across the sea and among the European-minded art critics of our eastern cities for Americanism in art. Whatever good work is done that does not give the American flavor or sound the American note can be excused by these critics as an excellent by-product, but must be discouraged as liable to interfere with the production of the genuine American article. Indeed the American article in art has become one of our successful industries. The continental relish for the American flavor is now catered to consciously and carefully by novelists, dramatists, musicians, architects, sculptors and painters, impatient to acquire European reputations. To be sure, Walt Whitman, Bret Harte and Mark Twain did not have Europe in mind when they created out of the raw fabric of their own experiences *Leaves of Grass*, *The Luck*

of *Roaring Camp*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, yet even these great men were subject to the lure of a foreign vogue for their native products, and they all lived to luxuriate in their own homely Americanism. Whitman especially seemed confident of his future influence with the European-minded critics. He was always arrogantly self-conscious in proclaiming that he thundered with the voice of a new continent and of a new evangel. Unquestionably there was in the man a glowing enthusiasm for the human species and a rapturous exaltation about the American social experiment. The European-minded critics are certain that "Old Walt" represents what American art is or should be. They insist that America is not only frank and free and brave but also vulgar and vain and fond of creating a sensation. Now it is true perhaps that our American symphony calls for a few blaring thrills of brass, but after all, the big bassoon cannot speak for the whole orchestra.

The paintings of J. Alden Weir unconsciously express the reticent, innate idealism which guides and guards the better known materialism of America. It is an injustice to ascribe to the average American an indifference to that grace of spirit which we call refinement. We may be a "shirt-sleeves Democracy", but we have our own standards. The attitude of the average American to that indefinable, unmistakable something which the old colored servants of the South used to call "quality"—the quality of their masters, curiously corresponds to that indefinable, unmistakable something in a work of art which artists and critics call "quality", recognizing an air of esthetic aristocracy. In the mind of Alden Weir the refinements of observation and emotion to which he was ever bringing his big, genial, whole-hearted tribute seemed to require from him also a technical language of similarly subtle and particularized distinction. He could suddenly become absorbed and fascinated by the momentary effect of a long familiar and unremarkable scene. I am thinking of what Weir found so paintable in the mere corner of a high pasture, just a bit of sunshine

playing along a stone wall and a well worn foot-path, and a silvery green tree outspread against a warm blue sky. The design of the picture I discovered later to be an original and delightful one, but my first pleasure was that of recognition. I seemed to have passed that way many a time and to have unconsciously noticed just such an effect of light and color. Memories came back to me of walks in the country—of days on a farm. It is wonderful that some little songs and apparently casual little landscapes have such power to make the fugitive moods which come and go with the ordinary round of our days and nights almost haunting in their persistence and poignancy. So also with Weir's portraits. He could see distinction in an apparently unremarkable model and make us see what he had seen to like and admire. Whether convinced or not, our hearts go out to him for feeling that way about people; for saying and believing and repeating that homelessness covers but cannot conceal the beauties which are real and endeared by association and distinguished, not by conventional comeliness, but by essential character. Of such a kind was the idealism of Weir and in spite of the European-minded critics, we know that this chivalry of thought and this idealizing love of familiar things are traits of the fundamental, the original American.

His themes were American, his mind was American, his method was American, and he was American heart and soul. Of his patriotism there are many stories told. Although forty-six years old at the time of the war with Spain, he volunteered for active military service. I shall never forget the fire in his eyes as he spoke of our national dishonor in the unhappy early years of the World War. Now <sup>l</sup> <sup>s</sup> will the splendid memory fade of that inclement day when Weir, old and ill and lame, but buoyant, ardent, eager to show his colors, marched with the artists in the Preparedness Parade. It is only natural that Weir's national spirit should have been strong, for the child is father of the man, and Weir's childhood was spent at West Point where his father, Robert W. Weir,



VISITING NEIGHBORS



A GENTLEWOMAN

J U L I A N      A L D E N      W E I R

was professor of drawing from 1834 to 1877 in the U. S. Military Academy. J. Alden Weir was born at the Point, August 30th, 1852, one of sixteen children. From all accounts Julian was a normal, active, athletic American boy and, needless to say, an imaginative one. I have heard a story told of his childhood which shows his early initiative and enterprise. An old friend remembers that one moonlight night, with some small companions, he was found half way up a very tall ladder which the boys had placed against the steep wall of an old barn. Julian explained that they were going to try to get up to the moon, which, to their excited eyes, appeared to have landed big and bright right on top of the roof. There was nothing precocious either in his mind or in his talent in the days when he first tried his hand at drawing under his father's instruction in that old barn back of the house. Nevertheless, the boy's enjoyment of pictures developed rapidly and he was determined to become an artist. His taste preceded his talent and he showed very soon that art was his natural language, that the root of the matter, so to speak, was in him. Given this inherent esthetic instinct, and the patient, self-reliant tenacity of purpose which characterized him from the first, and he was certain sooner or later to succeed.

As a newspaper critic once shrewdly suggested—if Weir had, in his student days, worked in an intimate relation with some great artist who had been also a congenial spirit and who would have helped him to mature his individuality of mind and hand, a master who would have borne the same relation to him that Twachtman bore to Ernest Lawson, he would probably in that case have arrived and found himself and formed his own peculiarly distinguished style much sooner than he did. The man who almost, though not quite, performed this service for Weir was the Frenchman, Bastien Lepage. Weir went to Paris to study painting in 1873, and was enrolled in the Ecole des Beaux Arts under Gérôme, the painter of large, historical tableaux which show infinite labor

in archeological research and imitative drawing. Consequently the pictures young Weir painted during his first year in that studio were *à la Gérôme*, and that means the antithesis of what he himself was destined to do. Although he never lost his admiration for Gérôme as a teacher and was always glad to have had such grounding in correct drawing and minute observation as the pupils of this stern old painter could not fail to receive, yet it was not long before the student saw the coldness and hardness of the method of his master, and even before he left the studio, other lights were leading his undecided steps in very different directions. Gérôme disapproved violently of Courbet and the Impressionists, yes, even of Millet and Corot, but to his credit be it said, he never interfered with the temperamental predilections of his pupils. He trained them conscientiously and solicitously in their drawing, but when they knew how to draw, he sent them on their separate ways with his warning. In 1873 Weir met for the first time Jules Bastien Lepage, and subsequently became the intimate friend of this brilliant young Frenchman who, like so many other artists destined to an early death, matured rapidly and achieved in early youth both a style and a reputation. Bastien at twenty-five seems to have been regarded as a leader, as a "cher maître" by the group of art students who gathered around him and were his comrades. Alden Weir was of this group.

In the book on Modern French Masters (Century Co. 1896) which presented biographical appreciations by American painters, the chapter on Bastien Lepage was written by Weir. It is full of intimate talk about the subjects which were of supreme interest to the Parisian art student of his time. Many a pupil of Gérôme shared Weir's revolt against the artificiality and the perfunctory elaborations turned out with great effort in the name of art for the applause of the populace and for the awards of the Government. There was a great cry for a return to nature. At Mlle. Anna's restaurant, in the particular circle where young Bastien dined



with his admirers hung a picture of a French holiday in Spring, which he had given in payment of his account. This picture was decorated by the boys when Bastien failed to win the Prix de Rome with his picture of *The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds*, and not one of the group but felt assured of their superior wisdom to the members of the academic jury who had so stupidly failed to honor themselves in honoring their idol. Bastien invited them all to visit him at his home in the village of Damvillers during the fête of the village, and Weir describes the experience with delight in the memory. As he says, "We loved Bastien for his honesty, his truth and his sincerity" and he retained a good part, if not all, of his boyish enthusiasm for the French realist's art, with its genuine love of nature and human nature, its unaffected simplicity, its kinship of line to Holbein, its popular adaptation of the subjects of Millet and the true values of Manet. I have touched at some length on the atelier of Gérôme and on the friendship with Bastien because there is something significant in the fact that, unlike so many others who had felt the force of Gérôme's teaching and the charm of Bastien's friendship, Weir showed no lasting trace of the influence of either man. One of the few subjects upon which he often felt impelled in later days to speak with some severity was the tendency of teachers of painting in all periods to impose their own methods upon their pupils, thus encouraging them to become dependent imitators, and preventing the discovery and development of their own individual powers of observation and expression. I remember how proud he was of the success of one of his pupils whose method was in no way suggestive of his own, yet who had thanked him fervently for the instruction and inspiration and the insight into his own special qualities without which he would never have attained self-realization. In his own student days Weir was unconsciously directing his own course and choosing to take to himself only what he would eventually need.

As a student Alden Weir painted genre, still life, portraits and landscapes, and only his very earliest works, which he destroyed, showed the influence of Gérôme. I have seen evidences of his extraordinary versatility in these formative years, a charming head of a young Breton girl, a group of French children burying a dead bird, delicately drawn in a manner suggestive of Boutet de Monvel, a Vollon-like *still life*, a romantic figure composition with light and shade showing the influence of Italy, finally a bright and rather *tight* little landscape, giving promise, with its joyous intimacy of mood of the great landscape poems of later periods. The handsome young American evidently was adaptable, impressionable, responsive to many influences and all of them fine ones. But he had not found himself in these days. He was traveling pleasant ways, seeking beauty everywhere, unconsciously searching for himself and exerting, as I have said, an unconscious direction over his search, but failing yet to find his own individual expression. In 1876 he went to Spain and thenceforth Velasquez became his God of painting. It was only after seeing Velasquez that Weir really caught up with the advances made in his own time by such men as Whistler, Fantin and Manet. Returning to the United States in 1877, he spent the next two years in New York in John F. Weir's studio in the Benedict Building. It was then he painted *The Muse of Music*, a very handsome and well painted thing in the grand manner, formal and not entirely sincere, for the grand manner did not come naturally to Weir who was always what the French call an "Intimist."

In 1880 Weir won a medal in the Salon and went with Bastien to Belgium. In the summer of 1881 he went to Holland with his brother and John H. Twachtman. This was the beginning of the intimate friendship of the two great American artists. From all accounts it was a delightful summer, and Weir grew to reverence Rembrandt for tone and poetry, and Franz Hals for his bold mastery of medium, and as never before to love landscape motifs,



PAN AND THE WOLF



THE DONKEY RIDE (1877)

the immense skies of Holland with their ever changing and never failing fascination of light. In 1883 Weir was again in Paris, and on this trip he was chiefly interested in the Impressionists, becoming so convinced of their importance that he purchased many of their works for Mr. Erwin Davis who had commissioned the young American painter to buy for him some representative examples by the contemporary Frenchmen, relying upon his taste, his already celebrated eye for true quality in works of art. Fortunately, through Weir's influence, the *Jeanne d'Arc* by Bastien and the *Woman with Parrot* and *Boy with Sword* by Manet passed from the Davis collection to the Metropolitan Museum where they are monuments to the wisdom of Weir, and where they have exerted a powerful influence in the development of American art. By this time Weir's taste was formed. It remained for him, however, to work out his own artistic destiny and save himself from the quicksands of eclecticism.

It is said that when Weir came back from Paris in 1877 he was in appearance, in taste and in manner a charming Parisian. Although the years abroad had been for him a period of great inspiration and enjoyment, and although Europe had given him his education as an artist, nevertheless, he never seems to have even seriously considered the idea of living outside of his own country and, after his return in 1883, he married and settled down on a farm in Connecticut, exhibiting pictures with regularity in New York and Boston, and becoming the most American of Americans. He made hosts of friends with his enchanting smile and his genial sportsmanship. One knew that under the surface there was rugged manliness which could be aggressive, but one knew also of the kindness and tenderness of the man and his high ideal for art and conduct. He was soon elected a member of the Tile Club which included among many of New York's most representative men in the various arts, William M. Chase, Frank D. Millet, Edwin A. Abbey, Hopkinson Smith and Augustus St. Gaudens. During

this period his style was still in the process of being formed through the knowledge gained by constant experiment. He knew what he wanted to say. The American portraits and landscapes which he wished to paint were already in his mind's eye, but at the exhibitions during the 80's Weir was represented by pictures which won the praise of the more discerning critics for their quality rather than for their originality. He revealed what he had learned in Europe, and his aim seemed to be, what with Chase it always was, to show America "*la bonne peinture*", the intrinsic beauty of surface obtainable in oil painting which ought to be cherished for its own sake. It was what America needed at the time, this emphasis of the young men upon art for art's sake, this insistence that in art, subject, however pretentious, is of no consequence without style which may dignify the slightest subject. Weir's still life of this period is as distinguished as that of Vollon and superior to what Chase and Emil Carlsen were doing at the time. Collectors are proud today if they have kept the luscious paintings of roses arbitrarily relieved against dark backgrounds, which they probably acquired without due appreciation of their historical importance. These things possess so delicious and unctuous a pigment, so charmingly rendering their subjects with especial regard to richness of tone and texture that they would make Weir sure of a reputation as a painter's painter even if he had not gone on to greater achievements. While America was learning to recognize "quality" in painting through just such masterly works as these by Weir, the young painter himself was experimenting with new methods, new ideas and a new palette. The portraits which he exhibited at this time indicate the chosen direction of his progress, but they were considered, and correctly so, inferior to his still life. They showed his desire to emulate the wonderful dull blacks of Franz Hals and Manet, and their even more wonderful flesh tones kept gray and flat by a diffusion of enveloping atmosphere rather than accented and modelled in arbitrary light and shade. But Weir missed the magic

of these secrets known only to Manet and Hals, and today his early portraits seem rather dull and austere.

The turning point in Weir's artistic life came in 1891 when at the Blakeslee Galleries he showed for the first time a collection of landscapes in the high key of color and with the transparent shadows of the French "Luminarists". A second important landmark was the exhibition at the American Art Galleries in 1893 of works by Weir and Twachtman, together with a few pictures by Monet and Bernard which were included for purposes of explanation. The newspaper critics, who had considerable influence at that time, applauded the celebrated Frenchmen so that their pictures were acquired by a few daring collectors, but these same critics lacked the courage to recommend the American disciples whose more conservative pictures failed to find anyone bold enough to either purchase or praise. Monet was purchased as a curiosity because of his foreign vogue. Twachtman, less of a curiosity than Monet in his method, was utterly incomprehensible and, being an American, negligible. It must be remembered that at this time Americans were so much obsessed by foreign paintings that they were inclined to be dubious whether any art, good or at least original, could come out of their own country.

Weir was fond of telling a story about one of the few sales recorded at this exhibition. A certain collector over whom Weir had an influence but whose admiration for Weir's work did not extend to Twachtman, was finally persuaded to buy one of Twachtman's landscapes which Weir had pronounced great and worth its weight in gold. Weir would not consent to sell this collector a picture of his unless he also bought an example of the art of his friend, whose work he insisted was finer than his own. The result was that Weir selected a picture for the collection and the collector condescended to humor him and acquired it. Proud of his purchases and glad to appear to the two artists as a daring patron of their adventurous method, the collector invited both men to

his house to dinner. Weir arrived late and found Twachtman ill at ease and dejected. At the first opportunity he inquired the cause. "My God," growled Twachtman, "haven't you noticed? They have hung my picture upside down."

Weir and Twachtman had become zealous converts to this new style of painting; the application to canvas of broken colors which, by the demonstrations of Monet, had been proved capable of recombination, not by mixture on the palette, but by juxtaposition, fresh from the tubes, so as to give a closer suggestion of light. Both had promptly set to work to study the great *Out of Doors* with new eyes. While still painting and exhibiting tonal pictures of most discreet conservatism Weir and Twachtman were preparing to apply Monet's method to American subjects and to carry it on with modifications which would make it more adaptable to individuality of expression and more amenable to beauty. No one else, perhaps not even the artists themselves, realized the importance of the steps they were taking. These American pupils were to surpass their French masters by making their method more flexible and more spiritual while retaining all the truth and all the vitality. But the first experiments were not impressive. In fact Weir's earliest effects of sunshine were often weak, suggesting a sun trying to come out of a fog. The tonal harmonies were charming, however. The soft colors suggested to the contemporary critics the qualities of pastel. Weir had won a reputation as an accomplished painter of still life, so the critics were on their guard against any hasty accusations of incompetence. But people said, even some artists who should have known better, "Too bad—another good man gone wrong," and the critics damned with faint praise, and only one or two seemed to realize the tremendous importance of this forward march by two gallant spirits not content to stand still. A little later Childe Hassam and Theodore Robinson came back from France with sparkling rainbow palettes and began to paint with a greater facility in the new style, an



earlier attainment of their full powers than the early efforts of Weir and even of Twachtman. But the two great American painters of spiritualized naturalism proceeded on their own way showing the results of their study of Monet, but unlike Hassam, their intention to depart from his method and to adapt it to their own ends. What matters it now that those early landscapes of Weir's were loose without much strength, transparent in the shadows but without much light? The important fact is that they were great art in the making. And they intrigue us! We are conscious of something very personal and, somehow, very original trying to get itself said in a language not yet entirely familiar. And occasionally there is a wonderful work of art full of a touching poetry of mood and of remembered atmosphere; of impressions absorbed in moments of sensitive response and transferred to canvas with an art which seems, as yet, more a matter of lucky inspiration than of confident mastery of method.

I have a small landscape of about this time, a country lane in Spring with a glad sun shining and a hint of birdsong in the sweet, still air. There are radiant pinks and tender greens, an endearing touch, a lyric charm. Usually the sun in the early Weir landscapes did not shine so well. But they are invariably full of dimly lighted or partially shadowed places which are marvels of tone. It is certainly not difficult for us now to see the great Weir emerging out of these lovely pictures which were in their day accounted failures. Some critics had faith in them. Clarence Cook wrote in 1891, "Weir sees as the Venetians and Velasquez rather than as Raphael, Durer and Ingres, with their hard, precise and analytic eyes. And these new works show no violent change. They are the logical outcome of Weir's artistic tendency since his return from Europe. Only the key has changed. The man is on his way." Here at least was one critic who saw that Weir was approaching, if indeed he had not already arrived, at that starting point of all the art that is truly great—when the method is discovered and

occasionally the scope and aim of it realized whereby one's own innermost individual *Something*, may be given to the world to add to the sum of the world's treasure.

## II

And so after ten years of experiment and cultivation the art of J. Alden Weir came at last to fruition. He was destined to say in his chosen way something that needed to be said about his native land, and to say it more exquisitely, with greater delicacy of feeling and distinction of style than lay within the powers of any other American. The large, formal figure compositions, the still life, sumptuously rich and very personal, the sombre, solid portraits, and such masterly landscapes in the manner of Barbizon, as *The Old Connecticut Farm*, were only practice for the ultimate themes. When he had thoroughly mastered his craft and learned from experience and won for himself a hearing and established a reputation he then deliberately turned his back on everything he had done, disregarding the material success which could have been his for the asking had he continued along more traditional lines and broke ground in untilled fields. Chalky perhaps, and a little weak, the earliest landscapes in high key, yet they were eloquent nevertheless, of the great American painter who had finally found himself and who could be counted upon for an ever increasing mastery of his method and for works of the most personal, inimitable artistry and the most sensitive and beautiful emotions. Having discovered and attained to his own predestined style, his work became, for the first time, the spontaneous natural expression of his own life and character. Thereafter his pictures form links of record of a rare personality devoted with single hearted sincerity to the expression of the simplicities of life, the finer experiences of everyday which are only revealed to spirits of singular sweetness. The rare intimacy of the pictures of Weir,

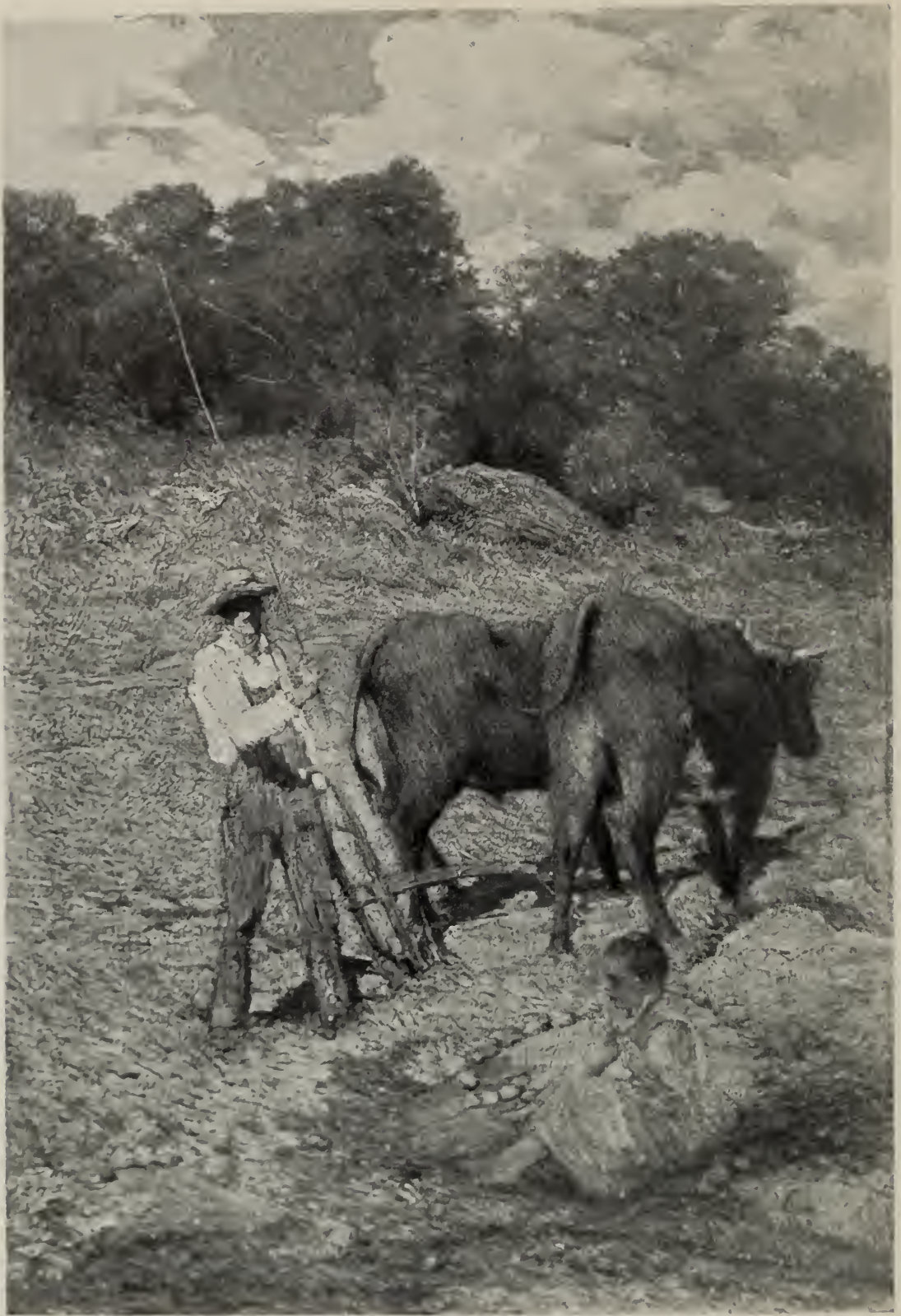
their true delight in little things and familiar surroundings, their wholesome joy in life's untroubled hours of serenity and health and genuine contentment remind me of Chardin, the difference being that the Frenchman's special pleasure was in the domestic interior, whereas Weir's was out of doors, on the farm, in the fields and woods, at the hospitable hearth only after nightfall. But both men wrote in terms of exquisite tone, color and atmosphere their appreciation of the quiet joys of just being alive from day to day, with a chance to observe how lovely things really are if we know how to see. Velasquez had taught him how to see, how to find the elements of beauty anywhere and to make for himself, by means of exquisite craftsmanship, true patterns of form and line and texture and of colors harmonized in light and air; a world of enchanting realities. It is, however, of Chardin's sensitively chosen scale of values, particularly his gamut of lovely grays and tawny tones that Weir's palette reminds me; of Chardin in the portraits and still life and of Corot in the landscapes. Chardin, Corot and Weir, they all had that intimacy of spirit which makes art particularly ingratiating. For them art became a part of their own lives and their way of conveying to others their satisfaction in life. From the time when Weir first began to exhibit his paintings in the new method there is no better way of knowing his life than through his art.

Very personal also are the landscapes which Weir painted on his own farms. He spent six or seven months of each year in Connecticut where he owned two country places and where he hunted and fished in season. He would spend alternate summers at Wyndham and Branchville. The place at Wyndham is an estate of 350 acres and has been in Mrs. Weir's family for a hundred and fifty years. A ball in honor of Lafayette was once given in this house. Each generation of Mrs. Weir's family has added to the original structure until now it is large and rambling and full of quaint charm. There are ancient forest trees round about which

many of us know in the landscapes not only of Weir, but of his friend, Emil Carlsen, who lived nearby for many summers. The other place at Brancheville is of 200 acres, heavily forested with fine old timber. The old house has an immense living room with an old oak floor, and its windows are quaint Dutch ones which Weir brought from Holland. Once when a party of friends joined Weir for a week of fishing in the Spring, three cords of wood were burned in two days in the two vast fire places at opposite ends of this room. Six foot logs are offered up and the sacrificial blaze is a roaring one. It is pleasant to think of Weir's handsome, silvered head in the firelight, his eyes merry with anecdote or softened with sentiment. He was a delightful story teller and a great listener to the stories of others. His big laugh was of a kind that warmed the heart. His mind was alert and active, keen and shrewd in criticism, yet generous and tolerant, the mind of a big man. He loved animals, especially dogs. It would be hard to find pictures more intimate in their charm than the water colors he painted of his own hunting dogs asleep around his hearth after a hard day in the woods. Fishing was a passion with Weir. Recently I was looking over his scrap books, and most of the press clippings were not about art at all but about "The Elusive Trout", "Beguiling the Tom Cod", "The Sensitive Salmon", etc. It may seem rather surprising that among his landscapes we find few records of the sport he loved so well; no pictures of the little rivers where he waded hip high, and of the shadowy pools into which he dropped his tempting flies! Evidently he felt that art had no more to do with sport than with politics and business. It was his life work to search for beauty and then to express it. Sport was his relaxation into which he could plunge with whole-hearted gusto, leaving art behind. There are two pictures entitled *The Fishing Party*, both very lovely landscapes with figures enveloped in silvery sunshine, but they are for connoisseurs of rare beauty—not for sportsmen. He was fond of telling stories, but not on canvas.



THE FLOWER GIRL



PLOWING FOR BUCKWHEAT

I do not remember a single story-telling picture from his hand.

One of the most charming and one of the most completely representative of Weir's paintings is *The Donkey Ride*, showing his daughters, Dorothy and Cora, when they were little girls, mounted on dainty and demure gray donkeys against a beautiful background of hillside and summer sky. This picture from a decorative standpoint is a thing of extraordinary loveliness. There is no modelling, no atmosphere, for everything has been deliberately kept flat to convey the joy of a mellow old tapestry. The well worn look of the old saddle leather and the rough hair of the donkey are realistic in effect and tempt us to touch, so wonderful is the *vraisemblance*, but these textures are lovely for their own sake and, although each bit suggests vividly the character of what it represents, yet there is an abstract beauty which ties every part together. Charming of course as a poem on all happy American childhood in the country, yet this picture is chiefly valuable perhaps because of its design, which is as fine as if it had been by some master of the Far East or of the 18th Century when Japanese caprice rather than classic convention ruled. Often, by the way, we are reminded of the spirit of the 18th Century in England. As Royal Cortissoz has observed, "There is the old English flavor of those winsome color prints 'The Cries of London,' in such a picture as—'The Flower Girl'"—a canvas which cheers and charms us like a quaint and ever refreshing song of long ago.

Scarcely less adorable than *The Donkey Ride* is the other donkey picture entitled *Visiting Neighbors* representing Cora Weir tying her donkey to a garden gate at about noontime of a summer's day. Whereas *The Donkey Ride* was not only a donkey ride but a decoration, this picture is first and last just a vivid glimpse of the real world at Branchville, Connecticut, and of a little girl who had a good time with that particular donkey, and who used to tie it to that particular rustic fence which her daddy had noticed took on

just that grayish violet tone at that hour of the sun-flecked green midday. The quivering joyous languor of the hour is conveyed in the artist's most masterly manner. The tree trunks are rough and beautifully true, the texture of the bark suggested in striated brush strokes of violet and brown. The drowsy, gray donkey and the little girl are immersed in sun and air. As the little girl would say, "It's the good old summer time." There is a monotony of content everywhere. How it stills the soul to feel a little breeze in one's hair, to stretch one's body till it thrills, to play with children and animals, to be a child again and follow the lure of one's own caprice in the great out doors! Richard Hovey, poet of comradeship and open sky, has put the mood into living language:

"O good damp smell of the ground,  
 O rough, sweet bark of the trees,  
 O clear, sharp, cracklings of sound,  
 O life that's athrill and abound  
 With the vigor of boyhood and morning  
 And the noon-time's rapture of ease!  
 Was there ever a weary heart in the world,  
 A lag in the body's urge,  
 Or a flag to the spirit's wings?  
 Did a man's heart ever break  
 For a lost hope's sake?  
 For here there's such lilt in the quiet  
 And such calm in the quiver of things."

Back of the old farm house at Brancheville is the rocky hillside which Alden Weir has immortalized in that epic picture of the American farmer amid soil and sky entitled, *Ploughing for Buckwheat*. Weir did not want us to think that the frame for this picture would contain all that was worth transcribing. He wished us to understand that his view point was more or less unstudied, that what he painted was a hastily selected part of the big world of cloudshine and old trees and fallow, fertile fields which stretched immeasurably above and beyond the borders of his canvas. This



largeness of nature worship and this unconscious function he performed of painting American epic poetry accounts for what has been called a carelessness on Weir's part in composing his landscapes. We have seen that in *The Donkey Ride* he could satisfy those who require a pattern in a picture, but the essential Weir was more concerned with expressing the big though simple emotions which nature gave him, than with the patterns which could be arranged out of her raw materials. If you are a lover of open American hill country, not the culminating majesty of mountain peaks, nor the perfection of paradise valleys, but just nice livable, lovable farm land, neither too opulent nor too austere, then you will enjoy yourself in the landscapes of Weir. The season is usually summer, the hour morning or approaching noon, with overhead light in a pale sky. In the *Ploughing for Buckwheat* great, billowy clouds are crisply accented against the azure in silvered brilliancy. A drowsy heat pervades the air. It feels good to drop down on some sweet-smelling hay under some friendly tree and look up. An imperceptible breeze stirs the upper branches. The distant woods are mellowed by traveling shadows. It is pleasant to watch the slow, brown oxen ploughing the sun-baked hillside and the farmer who turns from his task with a friendly how-d'do. In *The Fishing Party* the sun under which we stand seems to silver the ferny foreground, the sky, so subtly modulated in key from the horizon up, and the distant woods beyond the open fields. Across a little bridge pass the white-clad figures of friends, going a-fishing. If only one could paint the hum of insect life and of incidental, unimportant human voices, the sensation of any sunny summer day on a farm would be complete. And Weir was no more true in recording day than in remembering night. He fascinates with the exact effect of a spooky darkness as fitfully glimpsed in the flare of a rusty old lantern.

In painting people instead of places it is fascinating to see Weir's mind concerned with different problems and expressing beauty

and character with a technical method of combed lines and varied surfaces for conveying a sense of flesh and fabric under diffused light, which is perhaps even more individual and distinctive than the short stroke, the embroidering touch employed so wonderfully for the landscapes. In the many paintings in oil and water color celebrating the charm of children, one is led to believe that Weir's genius was never more inspired than in the interpretation of childhood. Who can forget the sweet and demure little girl whose kitten slumbers in her gently folded arms? This picture deserves to rank among the great portraits of children. Even Sargent's *Beatrice and the Bird Cage* is not more beautiful than this *Lizzie Lynch* of Weir. Sargent became tender and reverent in painting children, but when they grew up he saw them in his worldly way, wisely and without sentiment. Weir's humanity did not stop with children. His imagination was deeply moved by the old-fashioned American girl as he loved to think of her, in her sensitive, radiant youth, full of her sweet contradictions, free and frank and fine of body and soul, the comrade and playmate of man, yet more puritan than pagan, with an inarticulate reserve coming up at the first hint of sentiment, to conceal depths of dear mysterious, feminine emotion. All this we seem to know about Weir's young American woman without, of course, ever stopping to analyze her, which would be destructive of the charm the artist makes us feel in her presence. Weir was the inspired interpreter of a chosen American type that is marked by a penetrating sort of refinement which he revered and to which he could impart a charm through the chivalric graciousness and the hellenic joyousness of his own mind. This refinement which he saw and sought to express was not at all a matter of class or race, although the New England woman of old Anglo-Saxon lineage was a favorite theme. In the *Portrait of Miss De. L.* at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, we feel Weir's interest and respect for a type which might be called middle class European. We rather think



KNITTING FOR SOLDIERS



THE FISHING PARTY

(something in the colors of the dress perhaps suggest it) that she is a Jewess of European parentage. Perhaps she is a dressmaker or manages a small shop. She has been goodlooking, but years of drudgery and disappointment have exacted their toll. She is a brave woman. And so it is always with the types chosen by Weir. He sets us wondering about them. The men also are interpreted with profound sympathy and understanding, their physical beings suggested so that we feel their living presence in the pigments. The portrait of his brother, Colonel Weir, is a masterpiece and, as the subject requires, is ruggedly painted in a style which would have done injustice to his gentler sitters. And the portrait of the great poet-painter, Ryder—what a noble head! We know that this man is a genius and that he lives in a world of his own invention. Weir was Ryder's guardian angel. Some day there will be a tale to tell, a revelation of all that the great hearted Weir was to poor Ryder, and it will be the basis for a most beautiful legend. No two men could have been more different. There was never anything literary or mystical about Weir, and yet he understood Ryder's poet soul, and in his portrait we share his reverence for the superb intellect and greatness which animated the lonely dreamer whose eccentric personality and shabby appearance might have attracted mere curiosity and pity from the casual observer.

Perhaps the finest of Weir's many interpretations of feminine character is *The Gentlewoman* of the National Gallery in Washington—a person of rather austere intellectual type, so one might assume at first glance; yet soon enough we recognize that she is really a gentle, gray lady whose meditations are sound and sweet. It is delightful to remember her, the simple lines and colors of her dress, the unobtrusive dignity of her hands, the smouldering light in her downcast eyes, as of spent moments and bright memories. With infinite sympathy and admiration her youth has been revealed in the very embarrassment of taking leave of her for

always. Yet we see that the art of living is ever at her command and that the years will add to her exquisite distinction. Hers is a personality before which we stand uncovered, introduced by a great hearted gentleman who knows her worth and whose praise is as fine a tribute to a woman as ever an age of chivalry could boast. The man who created this portrait was not merely an accomplished painter; he was a great artist and inspired by a great ideal.

If *The Gentlewoman* is Weir's masterpiece in the idealized naturalism of his figure paintings—*The Pan and the Wolf* may be chosen (it was his own choice) as his most important landscape. Certainly it is the most impressive because of its classic grandeur of design. The artist seems to have said to himself, "Now suppose I try a classic landscape as Corot would have painted had he lived a little longer." And so—there is the same glamour of twilight on the edge of a wood, of color lingering in the western sky, of the illusions that linger in a green glade silvered in dew drenched dimness, of antique figures in a dreamy dusk. But now there is added pale air that trembles, transparent shadows on the rocks and jewelled gleams woven through the mystery of dark and light to make the memory of oncoming night not only more beautiful but more true. It was a daring thing to do to challenge comparison with Corot, yet the comparison was inevitable; nor does Weir suffer by it. The Frenchman may have been the greater master of design and the more perfect painter, but he confined himself to a much narrower range. Weir was incapable of repeating the *Pan and the Wolf*, as Corot repeated over and over his dance of dryads or of Italianized shepherds in sylvan settings where every tree is in its proper place. The two men were most alike and most spontaneous and delightful when they were content to represent the familiar scenes they lived in and learned to love. Corot pleases me most in his bright little *paysages intimes* of sunny country roads and his well loved lake near Ville d'Avray.

And it seems to me that it is not the Weir of *Pan and the Wolf*, but of such pictures as *The Old Connecticut Farm*, the *High Pasture*, the *Visiting Neighbors*, *The Fishing Party*, the *Ploughing for Buckwheat*, *The Spreading Oak*, the *Birches at Wyndham*, the *Building a Dam*, *The Hunter's Moon*, the *Afternoon by the Pond* and the *Woodland Rocks*, who will live forever as the poet-painter who sang the song of spring and summer and autumn in the American countryside, the song of American sunshine, of sweet American breezes rippling through summer leafage, the song of American skies, of New England fields, for all their stones, and of friendly woods, not in spite of but because of their slender second growth. Weir loved nature too much in particular places to alter the aspect of his familiar world. If an ideal loveliness is in his landscapes it is the idealism again of the man's own nature expressing its joy in reality through a magic of beautiful painting.

Weir's wonderful versatility and courage for new experiments, the adventurous spirit of the man, continued into his old age, and it is a joy to record that his latest pictures are in many ways his best. There seemed to be an ever increasing mastery in his method of solving each problem. Never before had he been more certain to attain beauty of texture and solidity of form, evanescence of light and concealment of labor. The *Knitting* of 1918 has exquisite transitions of light and the most enchanting tones. The modelling achieves on a flat surface, and without apparent effort, a perfect realization of weight as well as form. The drawing is profoundly sensitive and expressive of the subject, a wholesome American girl day-dreaming, as she knits her helmet of gray wool for the boy who will fight for her rather more than for Democracy. In spite of fatal illness and failing strength, J. Alden Weir, in this affectionate tribute to the American woman in the war, did his bit with all his accustomed genius, nobility and charm. On the 8th of December, 1919, Weir died of heart failure after a protracted illness through which he had been inexhaustibly cheerful, patient and

J U L I A N      A L D E N      W E I R

productive. He will always symbolize for me in his life and express for me in his art the wholesome sagacity of choice, the nervous complexity of purpose, the high, unformulated ideals, the virile simplicity of soul of our own, our fundamental United States.



## IN MEMORIAM

J. A. W.

Summer has come again to his wild woods—  
To trout streams and high pastures that he loved,  
To skies where bright cloud-galleons sailed for him.  
His little rivers glisten yet and gleam  
As morning sprinkles silver in their blue.  
His sort of sunlight sifts his radiance through  
His glimmering, green leaves. And shadows fall  
At evening with the same serene content  
As when his spirit seemed to fill the air.  
And when cool dimness deepens into dark—  
In his hushed mood of awe, beneath the stars,  
We marvel at the mystery of Night.  
Though he has gone—each dawn's awakening  
Calls us our best to bring to his fair world  
Where landscape painters find their hint of Heaven.  
Say not that he is dead while yet we keep  
His happy influence in the singing winds—  
While, in our sleep, we hear his laugh, his voice,  
And while his art immortalizes dreams  
Of the dear days he lived—and was our friend.  
Ah tell us not his life's at end—for we  
Still see his smile's brave and enchanting mirth.  
Nor can we ever be the same we were  
Before we knew this gallant gentleman,  
True to old-fashioned code of chivalry,  
Unsparring of the treasures of his heart,  
Who sought that finer beauty which, perhaps,  
Is all that we on Earth can know of God.

D. P.

EBENSBURG, JULY, 1920













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